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SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER TERM, 1946

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No. 846

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SEABOARD SURETY COMPANY,

*Petitioner,*

*vs.*

THE UNITED STATES

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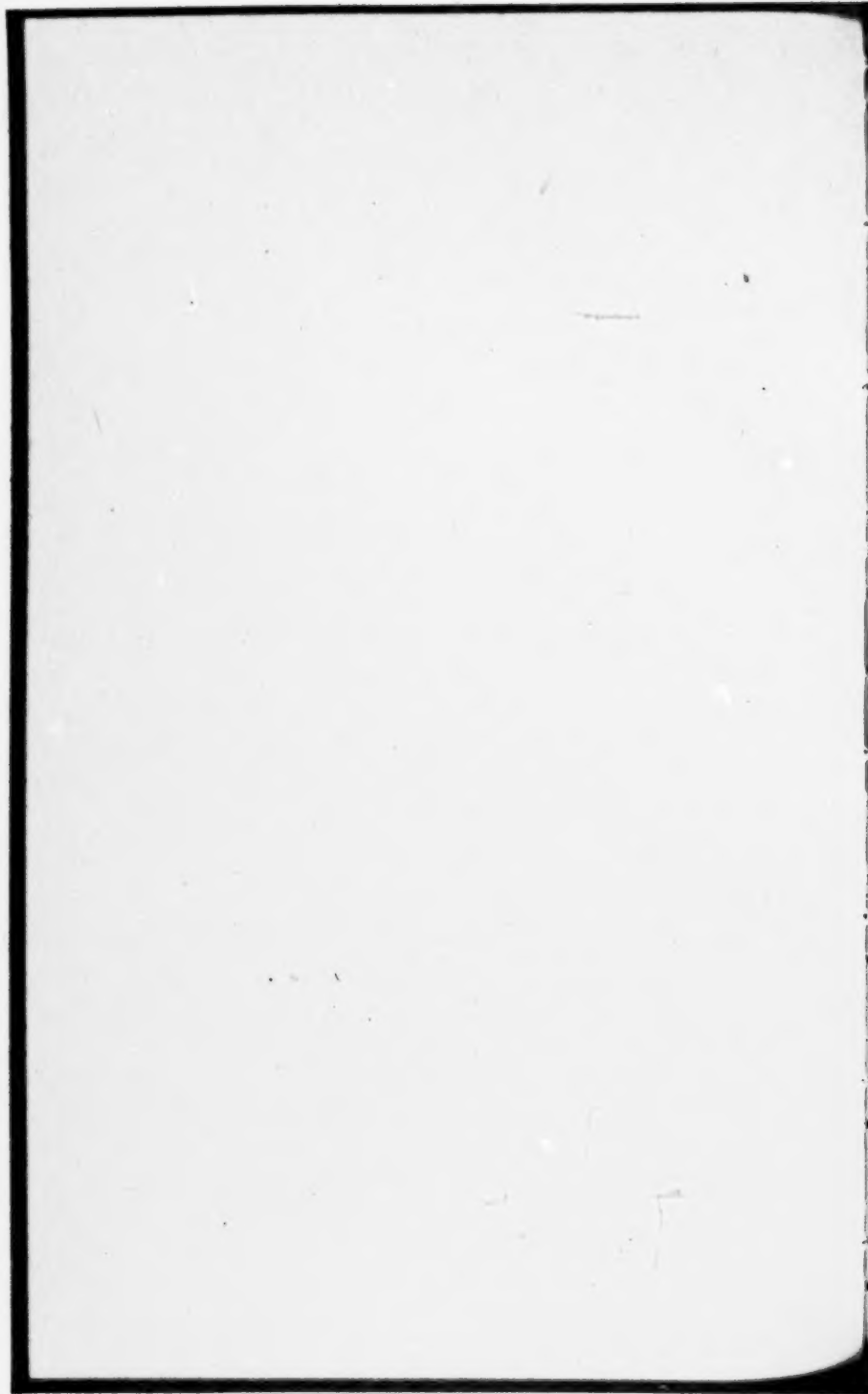
PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE  
COURT OF CLAIMS

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## STATUTE

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	2, 3, 5, 7, 16, 19, 21, 24

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SEABOARD SURETY COMPANY,

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THE UNITED STATES

*Respondent*

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**PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE  
COURT OF CLAIMS**

---

The petitioner prays that a writ of certiorari be issued to review the judgment of the Court of Claims of the United States entered in the above entitled case on October 7, 1946.

**Opinions Below**

The opinion of the Court of Claims (R. 25) is not yet officially reported.

**Jurisdiction**

Judgment in the Court of Claims was entered October 7, 1946 (R. 30). The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under Section 3(b) of the Act of February 13, 1925, as amended.

### Question Presented

Whether the equitable lien of a surety on the contract funds is so specific and perfected as to defeat the priority of the United States under Rev. Stat. 3466.

### Statute Involved

The provisions of Section 3466, Revised Statutes, 31 U. S. C. 191, are quoted in the appendix, page 24.

### Statement

In the case of *Illinois v. Campbell*, No. 35, decided by this Court December 23, 1946, it was held that the lien of the State of Illinois for taxes did not take priority over the claims of the United States under Rev. Stat. 3466 because the lien of the State was not properly perfected.

The Court stated the elements of a perfected lien are:

1. The identity of the lienor.
2. The amount of the lien.
3. The property to which it attaches.

and that the State's claimed lien did not meet these requirements.

There is no doubt that the surety's equitable lien in this case meets the requirements.

1. On the matter of identity, the petitioner, the surety, is the lienor.

2. On the matter of amount of the lien, it is the amount of the surety's loss incurred by paying the defaulted contractor labor and material bills.

3. On the matter of property attached, the surety's equitable lien attaches directly to the contract money.

Consequently, we urge, the surety's equitable lien comes ahead of the Government's priority under R. S. 3466.

The dissenting opinion in *Illinois v. Campbell* took the view that where a lien is properly perfected the lienor has

priority over the United States despite R. S. 3466. Inasmuch as the court did not decide the point in *Illinois v. Campbell* we feel this would be a proper case for granting a writ.

Petitioner was surety on the performance and payment bonds of Peterson Construction Company, a Minnesota corporation under contract with the Government to perform certain construction work near Calexico, California. The bonds contained the customary provisions (R. 20-21).

The contractor defaulted his contract and petitioner completed the balance of work remaining to be done, at a cost to petitioner of \$903.86. Petitioner also lost by the payment of labor and material bills the sum of \$5,771.37 (R. 21), finding No. 6.

At completion there was a balance due from respondent under the contract of \$3,703.86. From this balance the Comptroller General deducted \$1,862.62 to liquidate certain tax indebtedness of Peterson Construction Company to the United States and paid the remainder, \$1,841.24, to petitioner. Petitioner protested this deduction but the Comptroller General affirmed his decision (R. 21-22). The facts concerning the tax indebtedness are shown at R. 22.

At the time the petitioner executed its payment and performance bonds for Peterson, July 21, 1936 (R. 20), the latter's tax liability had not accrued (R. 22); but Peterson was insolvent at the time the Government asserted its first claim for such taxes in October, 1937 (R. 22), but was not concealing its assets.

On May 10, 1938, Peterson made a formal assignment for the benefit of creditors (R. 23), finding No. 10.

On July 21, 1936, when petitioner made the bonds for Peterson, the latter assigned to petitioner the monies coming due under the contract, to the extent necessary to indemnify petitioner in event of Peterson's default. This

assignment was recorded prior to default and prior to the time any lien or priority arose in favor of the United States for taxes (R. 23-24). This is finding 10 of the Court of Claims.

### **Specifications of Errors to Be Urged**

The Court of Claims erred:

1. In not recognizing that the petitioner had an equitable lien upon the balance of the contract price in the hands of the United States, which was superior to any claims of the United States as a tax creditor of the contractor.

2. In not recognizing that the United States owed a contractual duty to the surety not to vary the terms of the suretyship contract by diverting part of the contract price to the payment of debts of the principal not covered by the bonds.

3. In not recognizing that the surety, by reason of its payment of labor and material owed by the defaulted contractor, became subrogated to the rights of the labor and materialmen, and to the equitable lien which they have in their own right, as well as to the rights of the United States, in the balance of the contract price.

4. In holding that the United States had the right to deduct from the balance of the contract price in its hands an item of \$1,862.62 for taxes owed by the defaulted contractor, as against the interest of the surety who has paid the contractor's labor and materialmen.

5. In not recognizing that the balance of the contract price was not a part of the assets of the contractor, and therefore, Section 3466 of the Revised Statutes gave the United States no right to said balance against the property right therein of the surety.



6. In not recognizing that the liability of a surety on a Government contract bond extends only to the performance of that particular contract and to the payment of labor and materialmen thereon.

### Reasons for Granting the Writ

The bonds involved in this case are typical of those required on all Government contracts. The Comptroller General in recent years has made a practice of deducting from contract balances in the Government's hands, taxes and other debts of the contractor, not related to the contract bonded, but owing to the United States by the defaulted contractor, in cases where a surety has either completed a contract defaulted by the contractor or paid the labor and material bills left unpaid by the contractor. The Comptroller General claims the authority to make such deductions under Section 3466 R. S. (Appendix p. 24).

The Court of Claims, in the case of *Maryland Casualty Company v. United States*, 100 C. Cls. 513, held that the United States could not offset taxes owed by the contractor against the contract balance, against the surety's interest in the money. The Court of Claims then held, in the instant case, that the United States could make such an offset where the surety had suffered losses under its *payment* bond, but did not decide what the situation would be if the surety's loss had been under its *performance* bond. The result of this conflict is that the Comptroller General refuses to follow the *Maryland Casualty Company* case, stating his position in Case No. B-41334, dated April 18, 1946, to be:

"This office does not consider the holding in the Maryland case a controlling precedent with respect to the right of subrogation of a surety to amounts otherwise due from the United States, as against the right of the Government, to set off, out of such funds, moneys due from the surety's defaulting principal.

. . . . .

While the General Accounting Office accords 'persuasive weight' to the decisions of the Court of Claims and of other inferior Courts, only decisions of the Supreme Court are considered binding."

The question involved, therefore, in its essence, is whether the surety on performance and payment bonds can, in effect, be made to pay the debts of the contractor to the United States for taxes, or for any other debts, not related to the project which the surety bonds.

In the instant case, the amount of the debts of the contractor deducted by the Government is small, but if the Court of Claims' interpretation of Section 3466, Revised Statutes, is correct there is no limit to the character or amount of the contractor's debts that can be charged against the surety's interest in the contract price. As an illustration, a contractor may owe no taxes to the Government at the time of execution of the bond and contract but after his income tax report is audited by the Government, he might be assessed with a large deficiency; no surety could or would anticipate this hidden liability when it wrote the bond. The consequences of the decision of the Court of Claims in the instant case, and the present ruling of the Comptroller General, are far reaching and involve an interpretation of Section 3466 never heretofore placed upon that section and never intended to be placed on that section.

The surety, in consideration of writing performance and payment bonds, looks to its equitable lien and right of subrogation to the equitable rights of labor and materialmen, and its subrogation to the rights of the United States, to insure that the full contract price agreed to be paid by the United States will be available to complete the work, and to reimburse the surety for its payments to labor and materialmen. This will not be so if the Comptroller General has the

right, under R. S. 3466, to deduct miscellaneous debts, taxes and others, from the balance of the contract price in the Government's hands.

The Comptroller General takes the position that he will be bound only by a decision of the Supreme Court on this important subject.

The Court of Claims, in its opinion in this case, states at R. 29 that the decisions of the United States Circuit Courts of Appeal are conflicting on the question whether in the absence of a valid assignment or statute, the proceeds of a contract are chargeable with an equitable lien in favor of laborers and materialmen and a surety who pays such claims; that no case was cited by petitioner, nor was the Court of Claims able to find one, in which the Supreme Court has held that an equitable lien accrues in favor of laborers and materialmen, or to a surety in the event he pays such claims, on the balance due under a contract.

It will be seen, therefore, that: (1) *the Court of Claims has decided an important question of Federal Law which has not been but should be settled by this Court*; (2) *its decisions in the Maryland Casualty case and the instant case are conflicting, leaving in doubt an important question of Federal law*; (3) *the decision of the Court of Claims relates to the construction of a statute of the United States, R. S. 3466, which has not been but should be settled by this Court.*

On October 7, 1946, the day when this case was decided by the Court of Claims, that Court also decided the Munsey Trust Company case, No. 46,251, in favor of the plaintiff. It is petitioner's understanding that the Government is applying for a writ of certiorari to this Court in that case. The same basic question is involved, namely, the Government's right to deduct for debts of the contractor wholly

unrelated to the contract and bond. It is petitioner's belief that if the Court grants certiorari in the Munsey Trust case it should likewise grant the writ in this case because the same basic principle is involved.

**The surety who has paid labor and material claims under its bond has an equitable lien attaching to the contract price, which lien is superior to the claim of the United States as a general creditor for taxes.**

The landmark case delineating the equitable rights of a surety when, after the contractor's default, it fulfills the obligation of its bond, is *Prairie State Bank v. United States*, 164 U. S. 227. This case originates the doctrine of the equitable lien arising in favor of the surety who answers for the debt, default or miscarriage of another, which equitable lien attaches directly to the balance of the contract price remaining in the hands of the obligee, relates back to the date when the surety made its bond, and is superior to the claims of any creditor, including the United States. Hereafter the superiority of the surety's equitable rights, thus defined, over the unsecured claim of the United States for taxes and other debts owed by the contractor, asserted under Section 3466, Revised Statutes, will be shown.

The doctrine of the *Prairie State Bank* case has been followed consistently in all the courts.

In *Farmers Bank v. Hayes, et al.*, 58 F. (2d) 34 (C. C. A. 6), that court said:

"This is on the principle that a surety who gives bond to the owner to insure performance of a building contract by the contractor's is subrogated to the rights of the owner in the percentage which the owner retains as security for the performance of the contract; that when the contractor performs his obligation to the

owner, but fails to pay labor and material men, and the surety is subrogated to liens of laborers and material men upon the fund reserved by the owner."

"*Henningsen v. United States Fidelity & Guaranty Co.*, 208 U. S. 404; *Belknap Hardware Manufacturing Company v. Ohio River Contract Company*, 271 Fed. 144; *Exchange State Bank v. Federal Surety Company*, 28 Fed. (2d) 485 (C. C. A. 8)."

The retained portion of the contract price is as much for the benefit of those furnishing labor and material as it is to insure performance of the work, and the surety, upon payment of the claims of labor and material men becomes subrogated to their rights in the balance of the contract price.

In the instant case, and in the case of *Schmoll v. United States*, 105 C. Cls. 415, the Court of Claims advanced a theory that is directly in conflict with the cases just cited, with the *Maryland Casualty Company* case, 100 C. Cls. 513, as well as with other Federal cases referred to below, namely, that the surety does not acquire an equitable lien under its payment bond.

Compare this point of view with the *Farmers' Bank* case, as follows:

"But whether in the instant case the surety's rights arise out of subrogation to the rights of the Board of Trust (the obligee) or of the equitable liens of the laborers and materialmen, the result is the same. In either case, the equitable rights of the surety become fixed as of the date of the bond, and are superior to those of any holder of any after acquired lien. Whether the lien of the surety extends only to the reserved percentage under the contract, or also to sums earned under the contract, and retained by the owner, is a question which has frequently been raised. We think it is now settled that it extends to both."

The cited case held, plainly enough, that the surety's right is an equitable lien which attaches to the *contract price*, and became fixed as of the date of the bond.

Compare, furthermore, the Court of Claims' language in the *Schmoll* case, *supra*, that the contract money

"\* \* \* was not retained to secure performance of the obligation the surety discharges."

with the court's own language in the *Maryland Casualty* case, 100 C. Cls. 513, 522,

"\* \* \* But when the surety pays the laborers and materialmen, it is performing the contract as much as when it completes the building. We see no more reason why the parties should intend that, either under the guise of building the building, or of paying laborers and materialmen, both of which the surety has promised will be done, it should in reality, and because of the ease of bookkeeping, be paying the contractor's taxes or other debts, which it has not promised will be done."

Also:

"We construe the bond and the transaction as a whole as implying a promise on the part of the Government to the surety that it will not so settle the accounts of the contractor as to leave the surety in the position of paying the contractor's taxes."

This brings into sharp focus the conflict in the Court of Claims.

It certainly is a novel proposition of law that a surety may have an equitable lien in the contract price when it loses under its performance bond but not when it loses under a payment bond. In fact, the surety discharges exactly the same function under both bonds, for when it completes the building under the performance bond it only pays labor and material bills, because nothing goes into the building but labor and material.

This Court reached the conclusion in *Martin v. National Surety Company*, 300 U. S. 588, pages 597, 598, \* \* \*

"That the failure to pay materialmen was a default of such a nature as to impose a duty on the contractor to turn over the payments to the surety upon appropriate demand. There is argument to the contrary. According to that argument, the moneys were to be assigned in the event of default in the performance of the contract between the contractor and the Government, and not upon failure to pay persons other than the Government who had claims against the contractor for materials or labor. But the statute directs that a bond for the prompt payment of materialmen and laborers shall be executed by the contractor before the commencement of the work. Not only that, but the contract with the Government, which was drawn in the standard form, is a confirmation and adoption of the statutory duty. The terms of the bond are read into the contract, and there is default under the contract when there is default under the bond."

In *United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company v. Sweeney*, 80 F. (2d) 235 (C. C. A. 8) the court said:

"\* \* \* Laborers and materialmen, however, have an equitable right to payment from funds due a contractor on a public improvement, in preference to general creditors. *Belknap Hardware and Manufacturing Company v. Ohio River Contract Co.* (C. C. A. 6), 271 Fed. 144. The statutory requirement of a bond to protect them is not inconsistent with such equitable rights. *American Surety Co. v. Westinghouse Elec. Mfg. Co.*, (C. C. A. 5), 75 Fed. (2d) 377. There is a recognized equitable right of unpaid furnishers of labor or materials to such part of the contract price as may remain in the possession of the Government after the completion of the work by the contractor. *Riverview State Bank v. Wents*, (C. C. A. 8) 34 Fed. (2d) 419; *Henningsen v. United States Fidelity and Guaranty Co.*, 208 U. S. 404, 28 S. Ct. 389, 52 L. Ed. 547; *Farmers'*



**Bank v. Hayes** (C. C. A. 6), 58 Fed. (2d) 34; **American Surety Co. v. Westinghouse Elec. Mfg. Co.** (C. C. A. 5), 75 Fed. (2d) 377.

"Appellant was bound by contract to pay the claims for labor and material, and upon paying these claims it was entitled to be subrogated to the superior equities of the laborers and materialmen, and when payment was made, its rights related back to the time of making the contracts. **Prairie State Bank v. United States**, 164 U. S. 227, 17 S. Ct. 142, 145, 41 L. Ed. 412; **Henningsen v. United States Fidelity and Guaranty Co.**, 208 U. S. 404, 28 S. Ct. 389, 52 L. Ed. 547; **London and Lancashire Indemnity Co. v. Endres** (C. C. A. 8) 290 Fed., 98; in re: **Scofield Co.** (C. C. A. 2), 215 Fed. 45; **Farmers' Bank v. Hayes** (C. C. A. 6), 58 Fed. (2d) 34."

In *Morgenthau, Secretary of the Treasury, et al. v. Fidelity and Deposit Company of Maryland*, 94 Fed. (2d) 632, 68 App. D. C. 163, the surety claimed the balance of the contract price.

"By subrogation on account of the money paid out by it to complete the contract and discharge the claim, the Court held that the surety's advance to the contractor and its payment to the laborers and materialmen released the contractor from his obligations under the contract and, as this Court said in *Henningsen v. U. S. F. and G Company*, 208 U. S. 404, likewise released the Government from all equitable obligations to see that the laborers and suppliers were paid. The surety thereby becomes subrogated to the equity of the United States. Its action created in itself an equitable right which entitled to demand and receive the balance due from the United States, and this equitable right, as this Court said in *Prairie State Bank v. U. S.*, 164 U. S. 227, arose from and related back to the date of the original contract of suretyship.  
• • •"

The authorities cited above demonstrate conclusively the unassailable right of the surety to the contract price.



The true nature of the right of the unpaid materialmen to the contract price, and the equitable obligation owed them by the United States to apply the contract price in their favor is shown by *Philadelphia National Bank v. McKinlay*, 72 Fed. (2d) 89 (U. S. App. D. C.). This was a suit in equity by those who had furnished labor and material to a Government contract, the purpose of which suit was to *secure from the Government* the balance of the contract price for distribution among them.

The Court held that the balance of the contract price:

“\* \* \* Is earmarked with the claims of all persons furnishing supplies and labor on the contract, and this is true because, *irrespective of the statutory bond, those persons who furnish labor and do work on a Government project have an equitable lien on the fund for the payment of their work and labor until the fund is paid to the contractor*” (Italics supplied).

This case shows that the retained part of the contract price is withheld by the United States just as much for the protection of laborers and materialmen as to insure performance of the contract work. This case is a direct answer to the Court of Claims' position in the *Schmoll* case, *supra*, that the retained amount

“\* \* \* was not retained to secure performance of the obligation the surety discharges.”

namely, payment of the claims of laborers and materialmen.

The surety is a party to the contract with the United States and has a legal right in addition to his equitable lien, to receive from the United States the balance of the contract price.

In *Martin v. National Surety Company*, 300 U. S. 588, this Court said that the terms of the bond are read into

the contract, and there is default under the contract when there is default under the bond. This authority shows clearly the legal status of the surety as a party to the contract entitled to receive the balance of the contract price after default of the contractor.

It is well settled that there are reciprocal obligations, moving between the surety and the obligee, the United States in this case, proving the existence of a contract on the part of the United States to the surety that the United States will do nothing to injure or impair the surety's rights under the suretyship agreement.

The bonds in the instant case were conditioned for the performance of the work and payment of labor and material bills. Therefore, the only obligations assumed by the surety were these two.

The reciprocal obligation of the United States was to see that the contract funds were applied to the construction of the building, which necessarily included payment of labor and material bills. This obligation prevented the United States using the contract money for any other purpose. As this Court said in *American Surety Company v. Greek Catholic Union*, 284 U. S. 563,

"It (the Greek Catholic Union) cannot now ask that the bond be rewritten to cover an event not therein specified or contemplated."

The payment by the United States, out of the contract money, of the debts of the contractor for taxes and losses on other contracts not bonded by petitioner, was not contemplated by the parties when the bonds were written, and was a clear violation of the Government's contractual obligation to the surety not to divert the contract funds for any other purpose than intended by the parties.

In *American Surety Company v. Greek Catholic Union*, *supra*, this Court further stated:

“Where an insured undertakes to substitute a new obligation—thus substituting a new and different liability from any undertaken in the instrument of suretyship and depriving the insurer of the right of subrogation, such conduct operates to discharge the obligation of the indemnity contract.”

In the instant case, the United States, by diverting the contract funds to the payment of debts of the principal for taxes due the United States, was clearly substituting a “new and different liability from any undertaken in the instrument of suretyship,” and deprived the petitioner of the right of subrogation.

There was nothing in the bonds in this case which required petitioner to pay the debts of its principal for which the Government made deductions.

*United States v. Hodge*, 6 How. 279, states that the principle on which sureties are released,

“Is founded upon the restriction of the rights of the sureties by which they are supposed to be injured.”

The diversion of the contract funds to pay debts of the principal not covered by the bond, was an injury to the surety. By such action the surety was deprived of his right of subrogation to these funds.

Where the surety, upon default of the contractor, completed the contract work, as petitioner did, there is no doubt that it would have had the right to recover from the United States the money so earned. The Court of Claims said, in the *Maryland Casualty Company* case, 100 C. Cls. 513:

“But when the surety pays the laborers and materialmen, it is performing the contract as much as when it completed the building. We see no more reason why the parties should intend that, either under the guise of building a building, or of paying laborers and materialmen, both of which the surety has promised will be

done, it should in reality, and because of the ease of bookkeeping, be paying the contractor's taxes or other debts, which it has not promised will be done."

"We construe the bond and the transaction as a whole as implying a promise on the part of the Government to the surety that it will not so settle the accounts of the contractor as to leave the surety in the position of paying the contractor's taxes."

The Court also said in that case:

"We think that in no case is it intended that the surety transaction should work out in such a way that the surety has paid the contractor's taxes or unrelated debts to the Government."

It is clear from the above, that the Court of Claims recognizes the contractual obligations flowing from the United States to the surety, not to vary the terms of the contract, or to impose upon the surety any obligation greater than contemplated by the bond.

This case also illustrates the point that where the surety pays the labor and material bills, instead of taking over and completing the work, the rule is the same; since in taking over and completing the work, the surety would be required to pay labor and material bills.

Inasmuch as it is perfectly clear that a contract exists between the United States and the surety, which obligates the United States not to vary the terms of the contract between it and the surety, by diverting the contract funds to other purposes, Section 3466, R. S., has no application whatsoever in the instant case. Because of the contractual relationship, between the United States and the surety, the contract funds are in a different class than any other funds, and, therefore, are not subject to the provisions of Section 3466, R. S.

### **The Surety is Subrogated to the Rights of the United States**

The surety making payment under its bonds is subrogated to the rights of the United States. *Farmer's Bank v. Hayes, et al.*, 58 Fed. (2d) 34 (C. C. A. 6). *Morgenthau v. Fidelity and Deposit Company*, 94 Fed. (2d) 632, 68 App. D. C. 163.

The equitable claim of the materialmen, to which the surety is subrogated, is superior to the claims of general creditors. *U. S. F. and G. Company v. Sweeney*, 80 Fed. (2d) 235 (C. C. A. 6).

**The claim of the United States for taxes owed by the contractor is subordinate to the surety's property right in the contract price.**

This Court has never decided a case wherein the United States asserted, under the claimed authority of Sec. 3466 R. S., the right to offset against the balance of the contract price due the surety, miscellaneous debts, including taxes, owed by the contractor in default. Some recent lower court cases on the point, however, are helpful.

*In re Van Winkle*, 49 F. Supp. 711 (D. C. W. D. Kentucky, 1943), the contractor completed the building but failed to pay certain bills for labor and materials. The surety paid the claims, but not before the United States had filed a lien for taxes due by the contractor. Both the surety and the United States claimed the fund in the hands of the owner, the United States claiming under Section 3466, R. S. The Court recognized the surety's equitable lien and decided in its favor.

In *New York Casualty Company v. Zwerner*, 58 Fed. Supp. 473 (D. C. N. D. Ill. E. D.), the contractor defaulted in the payment of labor and material bills, which the surety paid. The Collector of Internal Revenue filed a lien against the National Housing Agency, to attach the final

payment in its hands. The Court held the surety entitled to the money ahead of the Collector of Internal Revenue, saying:

"The tax Collector by his notice of lien and levy can have a lien only upon funds due to the contractor and, since labor and material claims, and possible other claims, as heretofore set forth, will absorb more than the balance due the contractor on said construction contract, there is no fund upon which the tax collector's lien or levy can attach. This suit does not put in issue the amount of the taxes or the propriety thereof, but seeks simply to prevent the taking of money belonging to the plaintiff to pay the taxes of someone else."

See also *Heintzelman Construction Company*, 34 Fed. Supp. 109 (D. C. W. D. N. Y.), where the Collector of Internal Revenue had filed a claim with the trustee of the bankrupt contractor. The court directed the trustee in bankruptcy to apply the contract money to the payment of various claims for material furnished and labor performed for such work, holding that as to a claim of the United States for social security tax, its priority rights under the Bankruptcy Act are limited to priority as between creditors of the estate, and that the contract fund was a *trust fund* and never became part of the estate.

**The unsecured claim of the United States under Section 3466 R. S. is inferior to the property rights of the surety in the balance of the contract price.**

The authorities cited above establish beyond question that the surety has been granted the special protection of equity in return for having fulfilled its undertaking to answer for the debt, default or miscarriage of its principal, the defaulted contractor. Equity has granted the surety a lien, which is a property right in the balance of the contract price remaining in the hands of the Government.

Each and every claim of the Government under the contracts bonded by the petitioner in this case has been satisfied. The claim setoff, i. e., the tax claim for \$1862.62, did not arise until after the surety made its bonds and has no relation to the contract bonded.

There can be no doubt from the authorities cited that the law is well settled that the surety has an equitable lien upon the contract monies. The Government has no lien, legal or equitable. *United States v. Oklahoma*, 261 U. S. 253; *United States v. Giger*, 26 Fed. Supp. 624 (D. C. W. D. Ark.); *United States v. Griswold*, 8 Fed. 496, 500 (Cir. Ct. Oregon). The claim of the United States to the asserted priority rests exclusively upon the statute. No lien is created by it. It does not overreach or supersede any bona fide transfer of property in the ordinary course of business. While the United States has a priority on claims for taxes, such priority is in the assets of the estate, and it does not give priority over a valid lien. *United States Fidelity & Guaranty Company v. Sweeney*, 80 Fed. (2d) 235. The priority of the United States does not reach back over any valid lien, whether it be general or specific. *United States v. Sheriff of Charleston* (D. C. S. C.), Fed. Cas. No. 16276. Section 3466 does not give a lien to the United States; therefore, if a lien in favor of a third person has arisen before the right of the United States to a benefit has accrued the property is divested out of the owner, and cannot be made liable to the United States. *Lerman v. Lane Novelty Company*, 130 N. J. Eq. 141, 21 Atl. (2d) 827. The United States has no lien in any event by virtue of Section 3466. *New York Casualty Company v. Zwerner*, 58 Fed. Supp. 473.

The United States is an unsecured creditor of the same class as unsecured creditors generally, though *within its class* it has the priority of payment given it by Section 3466 R. S. It now claims that this priority in such class of



unsecured creditors elevates it to and above the higher level of the surety, which is secured by its equitable lien attaching to the contract money. But this literally would be lifting oneself by one's own bootstraps.

**Even if the Government had a lien for its taxes under Section 3466 there is no property of the contractor to which the tax lien could attach**

In the case of *F. H. McGraw Company v. Sherman Plastering Co., et al.*, 60 Fed. sup. 504, affirmed 149 Fed. (2d) 301, the United States District Court for Connecticut held that since the amount owed by the subcontractor to its materialmen exceeded the balance due it on the contract price, the subcontractor had no "right of property" in the unpaid contract, to which the Government's claimed lien for taxes could attach; that merely by assertion of the lien the rights of the Government rose no higher than those of the taxpayer whose right to property is sought to be levied on.

Where there is a default by the contractor, either in performance or in non-payment of laborers and materialmen's bills, the contractor has no property right in the unpaid balance of the contract price and therefore there is nothing against which a priority in favor of the United States can be claimed. *F. H. McGraw, supra*. *In re Van Winkle, supra*. *United States Fidelity & Guaranty Company v. United States*, 92 C. Cls. 144; *Martin v. National Surety Co.*, 300 U. S. 588; *In re Duncan*, 127 Fed. (2d) 640 (C. C. A. 3); *Karno-Smith v. Maloney*, 112 Fed. (2d) 690 (C. C. A. 3).

Since the surety is entitled to equitable as well as contractual subrogation in the contract price, it is plain that upon default the contractor had no right, title, or interest in such fund and therefore was without authority or power to assign the same. It could not deprive the surety of



its right by an assignment. The defendant would have no right of priority with respect to moneys which its debtor had no right to assign since Sec. 3466 applies only to the assets of the debtor in the hands of its legal representative. *United States v. Oklahoma*, 261 U. S. 253.

Priority claims of the United States under Sec. 3466 are subordinate to the lien of a mortgage which has attached before the indebtedness to the Government accrues. *United States v. Guaranty Trust Co.*, 33 Fed. (2d) 533. C. C. A. 8)

The tax claim in the instant case was first asserted in October, 1937. The bonds involved were dated July 21, 1936.

The tax did not accrue until after the date of the contract.

**The right of the surety to receive the balance of the contract price is superior to the right of the defaulted contractor's assignee or trustee in bankruptcy.**

As this Court said in *United States v. Oklahoma*, *supra*, the priority afforded the United States under Section 3466 attaches only to the assets in the hands of the insolvent debtor's legal representative. Therefore, the claim of the United States under Section 3466 must, in any event, be contingent upon the right of the assignee or a trustee in bankruptcy to receive the balance of the contract price in the face of a claim by the surety who has performed under its bond.

In the case of *Lytle v. National Surety Company*, 44 App. D. C. 1936, there was an unexpended balance of the contract in the hands of the United States, and a contest arose between the surety who had paid the material bill, and the trustee in bankruptcy of the contractor for the fund. The Court, in awarding the money to the surety company, said:

"The surety company, having a valid, equitable lien on this fund and being subrogated to the rights of the government to the extent of being reimbursed for the amount advanced under its obligation as surety, it is not clear just what claims could be asserted by the trustee to have the matter adjudicated in the bankruptcy court. The lien of the surety company against this fund was prior and superior to any claim shown to exist against the contractor or the trustee standing in his shoes. As against the contractor and likewise against the trustee, the equity which existed in favor of the surety existed not from the date of the bringing of the present suit but from the date of the bond."

In a very recent case, that of *California Bank v. United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company*, 129 Fed. (2d) 751 (C. C. A. 9), decided July 27, 1942, which involved questions concerning the surety's right to subrogation upon a building contract with the Government, the court, in the course of its opinion, stated as follows:

"Thus, in consequence of Anderson's (Anderson was the contractor) default, the \$37,170.04 then in the hands of the United States became a fund which the United States was entitled to apply to the payment of materialmen's claims, and which appellee, as subrogee of the United States, was entitled to have applied in reimbursement of the \$21,609.28 expended by it in paying such claims; and appellee's right to have the fund so applied *was superior to any right of Anderson or Anderson's assignees—if any.*" (Italics supplied.)

Other cases holding that the right of the surety is superior to the right of the defaulted contractor's assignee or trustee in bankruptcy are:

*National Surety Co. v. Lane*, 45 App. D. C. 176;  
*Philadelphia Bank v. McKinlay*, 63 App. D. C. 296, 72 F. (2d) 89;

*Moran v. Guardian Casualty Co.*, 64 App. D. C. 188,  
76 F. (2d) 438.

The Court of Claims in mis-applying Section 3466 put the United States, a general creditor, ahead of the surety, secured by a lien, which gave it a property right in the balance of the contract price. This is patently wrong because if it were good law any general creditor would have the same right, subject only to the priority of the United States. The priority does not elevate the United States out of this unsecured class. Despite its priority *within its class*, it still is subordinate to persons in higher legal relationship to the contract money, the petitioner in this case.

### Conclusion

The question is one of importance. It involves the rights of surety in every case where the defaulted contractor is indebted to the United States for taxes. Such cases will occur in increasing numbers in the future and will directly affect the surety industry. It is respectfully submitted that the decision below marks a distinct departure from the rationale of similar cases decided in its own court and in this Court, and should, therefore, be reviewed.

For the reasons stated, it is respectfully submitted that this petition should be granted.

BERNARD J. GALLAGHER,  
M. WALTON HENDRY,  
*Attorneys for Petitioner.*

**APPENDIX**

Section 3466, R. S., 31 U. S. C. Sec. 191, reads as follows:

“Whenever any person indebted to the United States is insolvent, or whenever the estate of any deceased debtor, in the hands of the executors or administrators, is insufficient to pay all the debts due from the deceased, the debts due to the United States shall be first satisfied; and the priority established shall extend as well to cases in which a debtor, not having sufficient property to pay all his debts, makes a voluntary assignment thereof, or in which the estate and effects of an absconding, concealed, or absent debtor are attached by process of law, as to cases in which an act of bankruptcy is committed.”

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# **In the Supreme Court of the United States**

OCTOBER TERM, 1946

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No. 846

SEABOARD SURETY COMPANY, PETITIONER

v.

THE UNITED STATES

---

ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE COURT  
OF CLAIMS

---

BRIEF FOR THE UNITED STATES IN OPPOSITION

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## **OPINION BELOW**

The opinion of the Court of Claims (R. 25) is reported at 67 F. Supp. 969.

## **JURISDICTION**

The judgment of the Court of Claims was entered on October 7, 1946 (R. 30). The petition for a writ of certiorari was filed on January 3, 1947. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under Section 3 (b) of the Act of February 13, 1925, as amended.

## **QUESTION PRESENTED**

Whether, where a construction contractor with the United States has made a general assignment

for benefit of creditors, the United States is entitled, under R. S. 3466, to use the balance retained under the contract to liquidate the Social Security and capital stock tax indebtedness to it of such contractor as against the claim for such balance of the contractor's surety who has made expenditures in accordance with the contractor's payment and performance bonds.

#### STATUTES INVOLVED

The relevant portions of the statutes involved are set forth in the Appendix, pp. 6-7.

#### STATEMENT

On July 14, 1936, Peterson Construction Company (hereinafter called the contractor) entered into a contract with the United States for the performance of certain work on the All-American Canal System (R. 20). Petitioner became surety on the payment and performance bonds furnished to United States pursuant to the Miller Act (Act of August 24, 1935, Appendix, pp. 6-7; R. 20-21).<sup>1</sup>

Shortly prior to July 28, 1937, the contractor became financially unable to pay certain labor and material costs under the contract, and on that date was declared in default under the terms of the contract by the United States (R. 21, 23). At the time of the final default, payments of \$52,-

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<sup>1</sup> On the same day, the contractor assigned to the surety amounts due under the contract in the event that the contractor defaulted and the surety became liable under the bonds (R. 23).



557.35 had been made by the United States under the contract, \$2,800 of the amount earned by the contractor being retained (R. 21). Petitioner completed the contract by performance of work of the contract value of \$903.86 (R. 21). Petitioner had also expended a net sum of \$5,771 under the payment bond for the satisfaction of labor and material claims under the contract (R. 21, 23-24).

Petitioner submitted a claim to the United States for the amount of \$3,703.86, consisting of the \$2,800 retained by the United States under the contract and the value of the completion work performed after the contractor's default (R. 21). By a settlement dated February 9, 1939, the General Accounting Office authorized payment to petitioner of \$1,841.24, applying the balance of \$1,862.62 to the liquidation of Social Security and capital stock tax indebtedness owed by the contractor to the United States (R. 21, 22). Upon petitioner's protest, the Comptroller General reviewed the settlement and affirmed it on May 29, 1939 (R. 22). The undisputed amount was paid to petitioner (R. 22), and this suit was instituted in the Court of Claims to recover the sum of \$1,862.62 retained by the United States and applied in liquidation of the contractor's tax indebtedness.

In addition to the facts set forth above, the Court of Claims also found that the contractor had made a general assignment for the benefit

of creditors on May 10, 1938 (R. 24).<sup>2</sup> The court held that, upon the formal insolvency of the contractor, a statutory priority under R. S. 3466 (Appendix, p. 6) arose in favor of the United States with regard to the contractor's tax indebtedness (R. 27); and that neither by virtue of the assignment of July 21, 1936 or any other circumstance of the case did petitioner obtain a superior right for a lien (R. 27-29). Accordingly, the use by the United States of part of the retained contract balance to liquidate the contractor's tax indebtedness was sustained and the complaint was dismissed (R. 30).

#### ARGUMENT

In sustaining the statutory priority of the United States herein, the Court of Claims specifically followed its own recent decision on precisely the same question in *Dewey Schmoll v. United States*, 105 C. Cls. 415, as to which this Court denied an application for certiorari on October 14, 1946 (No. 244, this Term). The narrow issue here involved is entirely distinct from the broad question presently before this Court in the Government's petition for certiorari in *United States v. Munsey Trust Company*, No. 847, peti-

<sup>2</sup> A claim was filed by the United States with the trustees named in this assignment for benefit of creditors but was withdrawn when, on February 9, 1939, the contractor's tax indebtedness was liquidated by application of the contract balance held by the Government (R. 24).

tion filed January 3, 1947. The *Munsey Trust* case raises the set-off rights of the United States in the absence of formal insolvency in the contractor-debtor and does not involve the situation here, namely, the statutory priority of the United States under R. S. 3466 where formal insolvency exists. Nor can petitioner validly claim any identity between the issue here and the question, which this Court has specifically left open, with regard to a specific and perfected lien urged in opposition to the statutory priority of the United States under R. S. 3466 in an insolvent debtor's estate. See *Illinois ex rel. Gordon v. Campbell*, No. 35, this Term, decided December 23, 1946. For the reasons set forth in the Government's brief in opposition in the *Schmoll* case, we respectfully submit that there is no need for review herein.

#### CONCLUSION

The decision below is clearly correct and there is no conflict. It is therefore respectfully submitted that the petition for a writ of certiorari should be denied.

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JOHN F. SONNETT,  
*Assistant Attorney General.*

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*Attorneys.*

FEBRUARY 1947

## APPENDIX

1. Rev. Stat. 3466, 31 U. S. C. 191, provides as follows:

*Priority established.*—Whenever any person indebted to the United States is insolvent, or whenever the estate of any deceased debtor, in the hands of the executors or administrators, is insufficient to pay all the debts due from the deceased, the debts due to the United States shall be first satisfied; and the priority established shall extend as well to cases in which a debtor, not having sufficient property to pay all his debts, makes a voluntary assignment thereof, or in which the estate and effects of an absconding, concealed, or absent debtor are attached by process of law, as to cases in which an act of bankruptcy is committed.

2. Section 1 of the Miller Act (Act of August 24, 1935, c. 642), 49 Stat. 793, 40 U. S. C. 270a, provides in part as follows:

(a) Before any contract, exceeding \$2,000 in amount, for the construction, alteration, or repair of any public building or public work of the United States is awarded to any person, such person shall furnish to the United States the following bonds, which shall become binding upon the award of the contract to such person, who is hereinafter designated as "contractor":

(1) A performance bond with a surety or sureties satisfactory to the officer awarding such contract, and in such amount as

he shall deem adequate, for the protection of the United States.

(2) A payment bond with a surety or sureties satisfactory to such officer for the protection of all persons supplying labor and material in the prosecution of the work provided for in said contract for the use of each such person. Whenever the total amount payable by the terms of the contract shall be not more than \$1,000,000 the said payment bond shall be in a sum of one-half the total amount payable by the terms of the contract. Whenever the total amount payable by the terms of the contract shall be more than \$1,000,000 and not more than \$5,000,000, the said payment bond shall be in a sum of 40 per centum of the total amount payable by the terms of the contract. Whenever the total amount payable by the terms of the contract shall be more than \$5,000,000 the said payment bond shall be in the sum of \$2,500,000.